Joe Plummer

Zosha Stuckey

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Think Before You Speak

The way we speak and the words we choose to use hold a meaning that is not always recognized in its fullest. Language is one of humans most basic forms of communication it allows us to portray our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and it is an injustice to ignore the fact that every word we speak has a great weight to it. In this essay I will argue that there are implications, both indirect and direct, for every word we speak in our lives. The meaning of a word should never be overlooked or taken lightly, and it is time that this is recognized so people begin to think before they speak.

Simi Linton calls for recognition of the greater meaning behind the way we speak in her article “Reassigning Meaning”. Linton argues that the term “disability” should have its definition be altered from a strictly medical definition to one that would place the disabled community in a common political and social context (Linton 225). Linton believes that by changing the meaning of the word that it will facilitate change in the way that we perceive disability. She is exemplifying the idea that language and the way we speak will have a huge impact on our world in ways that are not always directly recognizable. Linton wants us to know that the root of many thoughts, even oppressive thoughts, comes from the ideas circulating solely from the way that we speak in everyday life.

Oppressive language is everywhere and the word “retard” is just one of the common words thrown around leisurely throughout a day to describe an act or person. The word has its root in the former medical term Mental Retardation. Mental Retardation is medically defined as a cognitive deficit or cognitive limitations. Somewhere in the history or circulation of the word this definition has been twisted so that “retarded” can be used to describe anything and everything that might possibly be seen as stupid. By directly linking the word retarded to anything stupid society is sending the message that a person with an intellectual disability is inferior to any other person. By creating this binary people are segregating the intellectually disabled and essentially oppressing the entire group of people.

Despite efforts to raise awareness against the use of the “r” word, people still seem to use it in oppressive ways. Linton writes “Some of the less subtle or more idiomatic terms for disabled people such as: *cripple, vegetable, dumb, deformed, retard,* and *gimp* have generally been expunged from public conversation but emerge in various types of discourse” (Linton 227). The use of the word *retard* is a common practice in everyday life. Even though clearly the word has been declared outdated, and is generally recognized as offensive people still seem to ignore the meaning behind the word. The current term for what was previously known as mentally retarded is the Intellectual and Developmental Disabled (Siperstein, Pociask, and Melissa 1). The people of the disabled community and those who are actively involved in the disabled community have not only vocalized their concerns with the use of the “r” word, but have actually taken action to completely change the title that is used to refer to their group.

A study of linguistics done my John R. Searle further explains the implications of an implied meaning in a spoken word or a sentence. A “speech act” is defined as any act such as making statements, giving commands asking questions, making promises, and many other various types of speech (Searle 16). With every sentence we speak there are direct and indirect meanings. An act such as saying “I do” at a wedding is a promise that binds a husband and wife. Searle would say that by saying these words we are actually performing an action that has a much deeper meaning. There is always an act being made when someone is speaking, however the whole meaning behind speech act will not always be what speaker directly says (Searle 18).

A classmate of mine once said, “There are times when the use of the word (retarded) is not oppressive because you don’t mean it to be offensive” (Olson). This is a common misconception that the intention of the words being said overrides the actual definition of the word being spoken. Many people are ignorant to the fact that even though they may not have meant to say something in an oppressive or harmful way, the language or the word itself could be inherently oppressive. For example, someone may use the word retarded to insult a person for making a foolish mistake. By the use of the word retarded as to mean that something someone did was foolish or dumb the indirect implication is that intellectually disabled people would be the only people dumb enough to make that mistake. By using Searle’s idea of an indirect speech act it is plain to see that the indirect meaning behind this use of the word “retarded” is oppressive to the intellectually disabled, and should not be ignored or overlooked.

I myself have sometimes forgotten the gravity and real material impact that every one of my words carries, and have fallen into bad habits such as the use of the “r” word. After taking the time to really think about the meaning of the word however, it is blatantly obvious that I have been misusing the word. It is easy to say that using the word is “no big deal” or “not meant to be offensive”, but rationalizing has never gotten society anywhere. The “r” word is not completely recognized for all of its destructive qualities, and it is time to make a change and remember the significance every word we use.

Making a change in the way that society works and thinks is no easy task. In Linton’s article an in depth definition of the words “disability and disabled people” is provided in order to make a statement that a change in the meaning of these terms is in order. A change in the minds of society is called for in order to make a change in the way that people think and act. In the article “The Dimensions of Disability” by James Charlton, James defines the root of disability oppression by taking a deeper look into power, psychology, political economy, and beliefs systems in society, and he asks us to make a change in the structures that form our society to change this oppression (Charlton 157).

Both Charlton and Linton are trying to induce a change in society, but Charlton’s approach starts with societal structure and Linton’s approach starts with social structure. Social structure would entail more of a change in the thinking of individuals that make up society, and societal structure would involve a change in the established systems and networks in society. In order to make a change both of these tactics must be incorporated, and it is crucial to keep this in mind to try to persuade people to reassess their use of the “R word”.

Words empower people and allow us to do things such as inspire, promise, and teach. When looking at language from this vantage point it shows us the true significance that lies behind rhetoric. It is time to start thinking about the language we use in our everyday life and build people up rather than tear them down. The “r” word is an oppressive word that obviously will not be completely eliminated from use. There is no reason to delete this word from the records, but it is necessary for people to become aware that there is a time and place to use such a word. In everyday life as a substitute for the word *stupid* people are putting the Intellectually Disabled down whether they know it or not. There is no need to punish those acting out of ignorance, but rather it is time to raise an awareness that a change is in order.

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